

Capitol Report



This controversial painting of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, depicting the moment when the U.S. government secured a huge tract of Native American land in 1851, hangs in the Governor's Reception Room at the Capitol. (Submitted image)

Finding balance with the Capitol's art

By: Mike Mullen September 16, 2015 0

Sen. Dave Senjem, R-Rochester, has often found himself stuck in the Capitol building as yet another night drags on past the witching hour. With big thoughts on pending legislation swirling in his head, the former Senate majority leader has roamed the building's halls, taking in the portraits of governors long past, noting the different styles of dress or facial hair down through the years.

Senjem told of this habit to an arts subcommittee, an offshoot of the Capitol Preservation Commission, which is now working on recommendations for the long-term management of the state building. The arts group consists of legislators, state historians, architects and state agency staff, and is weighing its options for the best way to turn the "people's house" into a living museum that teaches Minnesota history, and accurately.

"In my heart, I'd like to see them all in there," Senjem said Monday, as the arts commission debated taking down some of the governor paintings. "There might be somebody else like me that does that."

There was one sitting next to him, as it happened. Retired Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Paul Anderson said he, too, had often taken strolls through the building to consider the art.

But Anderson, a serious student of the state's history, is not unwilling to break from tradition. Anderson noted, referencing other experts on the arts panel, that Minnesota's governor portraits are larger than those seen in other states, and said reducing the size — perhaps larger than the "Polaroid portrait" Gov. Mark Dayton has said he would accept, if it saved money — might leave more room for other artworks.

Later, Anderson questioned the location of one notable and controversial piece. A painting of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, depicting the moment when the U.S. government secured a huge tract of Native American land in 1851, hangs in the Governor's Reception Room.

D. Stephen Elliott, director of the Minnesota State Historical Society, said the controversy over paintings like that one — which has been on display behind the governor when he makes an announcement — is not a matter of accuracy.

"I think the issue with this is, is this a painting we want to have continue to operate in a key place and celebrate," Elliott said. He added: "I think it has to do with, 'Why is it in the Capitol?'"



Diane Loeffler



Dave Senjem

Rep. Diane Loeffler, DFL-Minneapolis, made clear that she wanted the arts subcommittee, and some of its various related working groups, to push for new ideas and not merely stand on ceremony. To that end, Loeffler urged an expansion of what are deemed "public spaces" in the Capitol, and even cast doubt on a longstanding practice of having certain spaces reserved for the House or Senate, when the same rooms could be used by other public commissions or groups.

"We're kind of a tradition-bound group," said Loeffler, who also mentioned the fact that Capitol tour guides are not allowed onto the House of Representatives floor. "But then, the traditions were put together 75 years ago, and no one remembers why."

On another point, Loeffler argued that the commission should not feel compelled to limit its thinking in order to stay within its current budget restrictions, floating the idea of a request for "art resources" funding, which would be due from the arts group by October.

At least within the House DFL caucus, Loeffler said, members had been understanding about the shifting needs in keeping up with any construction or redesign project.

Leaving aside who would actually be depicted, and what the descriptions alongside those art pieces might say, Senjem asked Elliott if he was confident the historical society had a "reasonable reservoir" of artwork to meet the arts commission's desires.

"Of course, you don't know what we might be interested in," Senjem said. "Neither do we."

Elliott said the society had more than enough pieces, both on display somewhere and in storage, to meet the commission's will, but said his bigger concern would be what kind of events, people and scenes the group wants the Capitol building to depict. At some point, Elliott suggested, the arts group could, decide to commission a modern artist to create new pieces that depict a version of Minnesota history that has not previously been told at the Capitol.

"It's not just a matter of going through the collections and pulling out pieces and plucking them on the walls," Elliott said.

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